

Clipper: A Ma and Pa operation

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The Duxbury Clipper, conceived over a bridge game, and for many years produced in our dining room, is still young as newspapers go. Yet, into its third decade, it has left an indelible mark on Duxbury, and perhaps because of that, has become among the most successful community weeklies in New England.

A “ma-and-pa” operation from the start, the Clipper was founded by my parents, John and Bobbie Cutler. Their combined knowledge of newspapers equaled that of a journalism student about to start his freshman year. Now after 36 years at the helm, they are walking encyclopedias of what a weekly should be. In May 1950, when the Clipper was born, Duxbury had a year-round population of 3,000, the summer crowd and a paucity of business. It did not seem a propitious time for so bold an adventure, and in launching their market surveys, the budding publishers heard many a discouraging word. “You’re out of your mind,” suggested their good friend, Arthur “Beanie” Beane when asked for an assessment. And the late Percy Walker, Mr. Duxbury, equated the idea with the old Duxbury Railroad, which, as he recalled, didn’t last long. There was also the government brochure, a piece of gobbledygook from the bureaucracy, which suggested that with at least \$10,000 (my parents had \$400), some previous experience and a great deal of hard work, one could achieve a “modicum” of success in publishing a weekly. Horrified by the advice, my mother stashed the document behind a bookcase, where it remained until the Clipper was safely afloat. And just who were these upstarts who launched an institution? My mother, a housewife, presided over a brood of four, later five. She could sing, and act, and paint, and grow most anything. She was a whiz cook, but a newspaperwoman she wasn’t. She was, however, wonderfully versatile, and could fix almost anything — two resources which proved most valuable.

My father, a Harvard PhD, was a skilled writer who had freelanced for several national magazines. He knew his way around Boston’s newspaper row, having written for the Boston Globe, the Boston Herald, and the now-defunct Boston Post, but he was not a professional journalist. No editor ever drilled him in the rudiments of a news lead and he was not comfortable with the five “w’s” of journalism — the who, what where when and why. He had never written a hard news story, and he knew zero about production. He once referred to a blanket — a cylinder cover on a press — as a bedspread. Neither he nor my mother knew anything about advertising.

But they would learn, and the good merchants of Duxbury proved to be willing teachers. One, Jacob Schiff, who owned a show store, said he would advertise occasionally if the paper came out on Thursday, which is why Thursday first became Clipper Day in Duxbury. Jack Kent Sr., who owned the marine appliance store, later Bayside Marine, was lukewarm when my father made his pitch.

"I don't know, John," he said. "After all, most of the boys down on the waterfront know we are here."

My father pointed out the reminder factor, noting that church bells ring every Sunday to remind parishioners of the services. People needed reminding, he said. There is no record of how Jack took that, but he bought an ad, and he and his son, Jack Kent, Jr., have been aboard the Clipper ever since.

It was a modest beginning as the Clipper set sail. With six pages in the first issue, it would slowly grow to eight and I remember the twinkle in my father's eyes when he announced, "we have to go to 10 this week." In the 1980s, the Clipper averaged 40 pages, often hit 48 and occasionally topped 52. Six pages were barely enough for the local sports.

The first issue was printed by kindly Tom Porter, who had a small press in his garage off Elm Street. It was he who gave the Clipper its name, my parents having toyed with such ideas as The Alden Journal or The Standish Times, or anything, really, that didn't include the word Gazette.

As the years wore on, the printers would change. Most weekly newspapers are put out by commercial printers and that was the case with the Clipper until 1976, when the family took a major plunge and bought a press of its own, a Goss Community, capable of printing 18,000 copies an hour. On at least three occasions since that purchase, the publishers have enjoyed the privileges of shouting, "Stop the Press," to change or add a major news story. (The press was moved to Marshfield in 1987). With the addition of the press, the Clipper is now a totally vertical operation at its office on South Station Street, and the offices are larger than in the early days, at our Washington Street home. To the children, it seemed most natural to clear away the 4H news or the high school sports report when it was time for dinner. We all thought the dining room was the hub of Duxbury. It was in that room that my parents learned the important lesson of weekly publishing. The credo evolved quickly: be provincial, keel it local; write about the schools and town hall, and Duxbury Bay; and leave the national stories to the national press. The Clipper has and always will be for and about Duxbury... The Clipper is as much a part of Duxbury at the Powder Point Bridge. For 36 years it has served as our "first rough draft" of history. It will do the same for many years to come.

